

torian Alice Friedman's *Dream Houses, Toy Homes* (1995), show how Harbutt's *Plastiline Builder* (produced twenty years before Bayko) emphasizes its antiseptic nature.

The telling image of a girl holding a doll and a boy showing his Bakyo house with the names of male and female authors on the cover led me to expect a careful treatment of gender. However, the authors only touch upon how the images of girls and women changed on the boxes and instructions of *Minibrix*, discussing how their role evolved from passive bystander to active builders by the 1950s. They postulate that "by this time the factory was already running into trouble—maybe that's why" (p. 111). And of *Castos* sets, the authors merely say that the manufacturers "encouraged [girls] to play a part in the great *Castos* project, and certainly when the builder comes to painting his finished model" and they fail to note that the part women were encouraged to play was mostly decorative (p. 144).

As Brenda Vale and Robert Vale testify, the toys that architects and architectural historians play with stay with them, but I would like to know more about the carpets on which they played with those toys, that is, the domestic context of their influence.

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### **Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game**

*Graeme Kirkpatrick*

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Graeme Kirkpatrick's study of aesthetic theory and video games seeks to apply aesthetic theory to what some view as a garish, popularized, and mass-produced cultural form. What do video games have to do with aesthetics after all? Kirkpatrick takes this question head on and argues that video games are a "historically specific instance of an aesthetic form," and as such they should be viewed through the lens aesthetics to be understood (p. 1). Over the course of six chapters, Kirkpatrick discusses the newness of what games bring to aesthetics. For the author, the newness of games is a specific way of approaching the text through the body, as a participant rather than as an audience.

Drawing on the work of Markku Eskelinen (a founder of *gamestudies.org*), Kirkpatrick demonstrates the difference between games and stories. As Eskelinen notes, when we are thrown a ball, we do not expect it to tell us stories. This example becomes Kirkpatrick's starting point for an exploration of games as texts that expect us to play along, take part in, and initiate the progress of the experience. He pushes Eskelinen's comments further by asserting that the act of playing can be meaningful without being subjected to interpretation. The act is its own meaning and its own goal.

Despite Kirkpatrick's initial claim that play does not have to be interpreted, he does commit interesting and thought-provoking acts of interpretation. For instance, in chapter 5, "Meaning in Virtual Worlds," he interprets the structure of video games as a constant revisiting of loss, and he points to how it is described as a joyless pleasure (p. 187). In this discussion, he demonstrates through strong and

engaging analysis the connections between game criticism and the cultural criticism of Walter Benjamin and Frederic Jameson.

In Kirkpatrick's chapter called "Ludology, Space, and Time," he positions the ludology (the study of games) of Espen Aarseth and Jesper Juul in the context of traditional aesthetic theory. He weaves the loose ends of structuralist game studies into the aesthetic traditions and understandings that the ludologists originally rejected, claiming that game scholarship was independent of them. These original ludologists did this to avoid having games reduced and understood only in the image of the previous, more static texts dominating the field of literature and aesthetics. Yet while this chapter performs the necessary task of positioning ludology in relation to aesthetic theory, it also leaves a lot to future discussion. As such, it represents more of a starting point for a discussion of how ludology connects to the wider body of aesthetic theory than a solid or even a convincing argument concerning how it should be placed today.

Nevertheless, this is an ambitious book that sets out on a very important journey. It connects game scholarship to a theory that needs to be activated to understand why ludology in particular and game studies in general represent something new. It is also, in moments when it unpacks the connections between the old and the new, a thrilling book. It challenges both the claim that ludology needs to stand outside of traditional understandings of cultural theory and the more established disciplines' refusal to take the new, often clumsy, and unfulfilled medium of video games seriously by bringing the two so clearly and defiantly between the same

covers. For instance, game scholars Helen Kennedy and Tanya Krzywinska are here cited side by side with philosophers and theorists Immanuel Kant and Theodore Adorno, positioning the scholarship of video games firmly within the study of culture.

Kirkpatrick's writing is dense and occasionally baffling rather than stringent and lucid. It is hard to say if this is because he struggles with the concepts and ideas that have not been rewritten and rehashed by several authors until they are logical and clear or if it is the result of his attempt to make a popular topic fit into a traditionally scholarly language.

Yet this is an important and interesting book—and a useful book for those who want to understand where game scholarship connects to the wider body of cultural studies. Perhaps the greatest strength of the book is the author's ability to go back and forth, over and over again, between his deep knowledge of a particular segment of game scholarship and the related aesthetic theory. This approach leads him away from discussions of structure and toward discussions of meaning and use.

This study provides us with a good example of how game studies simplifies the study of neither texts nor culture. Video games add complexity to an already complex field by offering the opportunity to understand the relationship between physical acts and intellectual pursuits as we try to understand how participation alters the experience of the cultural artifact and what it means to play a game.

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